

Job Interview Questions: Responding to Implied Meanings

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A good performance at one's first major job interview is paramount for the beginning of a successful career. Thus, we prepare our students at Nanyang Technological University for the job market by giving them practice in simulated interviews held in as realistic a situation as possible. For the occasion, we invited four experienced recruiters of Engineering graduates to conduct the interviews. The job "applicants" were 14 Engineering students (nine males and five females) selected by their peers from four different classes in a Communication Skills course.

Before the interview, the students did their resumes and letters of application in response to an advertisement taken from the national newspaper calling for engineers "with a vision." Their letters and resumes, reflecting their qualifications to date, were sent to the recruiters a week before the simulated interviews. These interview sessions were conducted in front of the class, each class with a different recruiter, and videotaped for later analysis.

Our analysis of the video tapes of the interview sessions showed that many of our students displayed the tendency to interpret and answer interview questions literally, rather than responding to their implied meanings. For example, recruiters often ask questions such as "tell me something about yourself." or "tell me about your hobbies, interests-how you spend your time." We found that our students answered such questions too literally, merely launching into a barrage of facts, as shown in excerpt 1 below:

Excerpt 1

Recruiter: *Tell me about yourself.*

Student: *Okay. I come from a family of seven and I was the youngest in the family, and currently I am looking for a job that relates to my study-what I studied-and during my days in NTU* I took up computers as a major. And my hobbies are quite. that means I have a lot of hobbies and they include.*

Recruiter: *You have time for a lot of hobbies?*

Student: *I was quite an active person on campus, you see, and I was once appointed the vice chairman of the CSGS harmonic group, and also the advisor to the Yishun exco.*

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Notice that the student does not seem to be aware of the implied meaning of the questions, answering them by merely reeling off facts about himself-being the youngest child in large family, looking for an engineering job, having majored in computer engineering, having a lot of

hobbies-facts which tell the recruiter a little of himself but nothing more. As one of the recruiters put it, he was really looking for ".not the facts, which would be contained in the r.sum, anyway, but the person behind the facts- whether the candidate is flexible, versatile, responsible, or shows initiative."

By merely stating facts, the students do not show their character or their personal development. For example, the student in *Excerpt 1* brings out the fact that he is the youngest in a large family, and leaves it to the recruiter to draw his own conclusions about what effect this could have had on his (the student's) development. In this particular case, this might have been unfortunate because of the stereotypical connotations of the youngest child always being the spoilt and pampered one. If the student could not make a correlation between being the youngest child and some positive characteristic which would impress the interviewer, he would have been much better off omitting that fact.

Answering the question's implied rather than literal meaning, the student could have said that, being the youngest child in a large family, he had always been more mature for his age than his peers since his interaction had always been with those older than he. Or he could have said that, being the youngest child in a large family, where everybody else had to help out in his parents' business, he had been left to fend for himself most of the time, and thus had developed a spirit of independence from a young age.

When talking about his hobbies, again he merely mentions the activities he is involved in, losing out on the chance to talk about how he balances hobbies with studies, thus showing discipline, something that would be to his credit.

Excerpts two and three below are two more examples of students failing to discern the implied meanings behind the recruiter's question, thus answering the question only literally.

Excerpt 2

Recruiter: *Tell me about your hobbies, interests-how you spend your time.*

Student: *Oh, how I spend my time, right. Well, on the weekends I'm involved in church activities. I'm the library coordinator, so I try to acquire Christian literature. I am also in charge of church publications, so weekends are spent in church activities, and also with my family.*

Excerpt 3

Recruiter: *You also mention that you are very active in your ECA and all that, right? Would you be able to tell me some of these activities?*

Student: *During my college days, in fact, I was involved in clubs. In fact I joined quite a lot of clubs in my college days. In my secondary school, I was president of this Arts Society, mainly helping out the students who are keen in drawing, organising some trips to museums, or whatever. And at the moment, during the holidays, I take up some of the jobs that are written in the r.sum,. In fact, I've worked from operator to clubs.*

Like the first student, these two merely list their activities without showing the significance on their character development. Notice that both students have leadership positions-one as library coordinator and in charge of church publications, the other as president of the Arts Society. However, these facts are unfortunately lost in the list of details, none of which really answer the question's implied meaning, which is, in this case, "Show me, through your activities, that you have the personality and character the job requires."

In contrast, one student impressed the recruiter with his answer to a "Tell me about yourself" question. This was the student who mentioned his struggle to go to a university despite his poor high school results (he failed English). Not being able to take the direct path to university, he went first to the polytechnic for his diploma. These facts-poor high school results, failure to enter a university, settling for a polytechnic diploma-by themselves are not likely to impress any recruiter. However, the student was able to go beyond the literal meaning of the question to address its implied meaning. What he did was to show that he had determination, a characteristic that most companies would want in their employees. He did not allow himself to be deterred by apparent failure. Rather, he was determined to work hard in the polytechnic, where he eventually headed his class and thus was accepted into the university.

From our analysis, then, it is clear that students need to be taught that their responses must look to the implied, not just the literal meanings of job interview questions. In order to do this, students should keep in mind three important aspects of the job interview in their preparation stage.

The Aim of the Recruiter's Questions

Students should always bear in mind the context of the recruiter's questions-the job interview. They should remember that recruiters are not looking for factual information alone (especially if it is already contained in their r, sum, s). Rather, recruiters ask questions to try to assess the candidate's character, through the implied, or real meaning behind their questions. Keeping this point in mind will help the student not to fall into the trap of answering the recruiter's questions only literally.

The Aim of the Student's Answers

Students should always try to give answers which reveal the person behind the facts, to help the recruiter assess whether or not they have the right characteristics for the job, thus addressing the questions' implied meaning. This is not as difficult as it may sound, since job interviews are so goal oriented and the context predictable.

In this respect, the following extract taken from a real-life application evaluation form used by recruiters may help students by showing them the kinds of personal characteristics recruiters usually look for:

Comments should always be relevant to job responsibilities or job-related characteristics. (Some examples of job-related characteristics are, ability to plan, organize, attention to detail, tact, ability to direct the work of others; or, conversely, to work under close supervision, and possess analytical ability.) These may not necessarily be directly observed in the interview but can be inferred from the applicant's discussion of his/her qualifications.

Necessity for Reflection

In order to give answers which demonstrate that they have the right characteristics for the job, students should reflect on their lives, education and work experience, and select some significant events to demonstrate responsibility or achievement. This has to be done before the actual interview since reflection takes time, time not sufficiently available during the interview itself. Those students who were not prepared tended to be those who gave literal answers, and literal answers only.

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